

Testimony in Support of S.B. No. 453: An Act Concerning Certificates of Relief from Barriers Resulting from Convictions of a Crime

Virginia Downing, New Haven resident

Judiciary Committee

March 23, 2012

Senator Coleman, Representative Fox, Senator Kissel, Representative Hetherington, and distinguished members of the committee:

I am Virginia Downing, 141 Sheffield Drive, New Haven, Connecticut. I submit this testimony as a private citizen.

I strongly support S.B. No. 453: An Act Concerning Certificates of Relief from Barriers Resulting from Convictions of a Crime. This bill will help people like me who face barriers to employment and housing due to a prior criminal conviction.

In 1998, I had a criminal felony conviction for drug possession and was incarcerated for approximately six months. Since that conviction 14 years ago, I have been a law-abiding citizen and have had no criminal involvement.

When I returned from prison back to my hometown of New Haven, the transition was very difficult. My landlord had moved me out, so I went to a halfway house and stayed with friends. When I did get an apartment, the apartment building was burned down in an electrical fire soon after that. The only employment I could find was a part-time position in a restaurant, which I had to supplement with Section 8 vouchers, Shelter Plus, and food stamps. When I had serious medical problems, I thought I would lose my job. Luckily, my employer was kind enough to help me out. I was in a shelter for a bit before finding my own apartment.

Eventually, I decided to get my certification to become a nurse's aide. I did get my certificate from Stone Academy around 2006. I was a nurse's aide, but my 7-year-old criminal conviction was a major barrier when I tried to get a job. I was eventually able to fill in for occasional shifts, but I never got enough hours. Bigger health care employment agencies denied me because I had a felony conviction.

I got unemployment compensation and worked a few other jobs including at a soup kitchen. I eventually got a job with the City of New Haven as a crossing guard, a position which I have held for approximately 6 years. It is a stable position, but it is part-time and I work just 10 hours per week.

The collateral consequences of my criminal conviction fourteen years ago are still a big problem for me. With the rising cost of my rent and my low income, I need to find a new place to live. I have applied to several housing authorities but they have not accepted me. Likely, they are performing background checks. I cannot find affordable housing.

S.B. No. 453 will help people like me. I have fully paid my debt to society, but continue to face barriers that give me problems when I try to get a job and housing. I have not had any criminal

involvement in 14 years; it is not reasonable that I should continue to be burdened by collateral consequences. By involving the court system, clarifying policies, and expediting administrative processes, this bill helps to remove barriers to reentry. I urge you to support this much-needed reform.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on this important issue.